DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 246 423 CS 208 384

AUTHOR Friedman, Sharon M.
TITLE Local Coverage of Three Mile Island during 1981-82.
SPONS AGENCY Lehigh Univ., Bethlehem, Pa.
PUB DATE Aug 84
NOTE 36p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (67th, Gainesville, FL, August 5-8, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Change; Editing; Interviews; Journalism; Media Research; *News Media; *Newspapers; *News Reporting; News Writing; *Nuclear Power Plants; *Press Opinion; Television
IDENTIFIERS *Journalism Research; News Reporters; *Three Mile Island

ABSTRACT

Local newspaper coverage of the Three Mile Island (TMI) nuclear power plant accident was examined in a study to determine what changes, if any, were made by local media and what lessons they had learned from it. Data were collected through interviews with 21 media representatives. TMI coverage in the six newspapers was examined using each newspaper's clipping files for 1981-82. Last, to get a different view of the newspapers' performance, people who had served as news sources for the local media during this time were interviewed. Findings showed that the number of articles on TMI printed by the six newspapers increased more than 10-fold in 1981-82, compared to a two-year period before the accident. Coverage focused primarily on the clean up of the damaged reactor in 1981, but shifted to concerns over restarting the undamaged reactor in 1982. Four newspapers had established parttime TMI beats, with reporters indicating that they spent more time covering TMI after than before the accident. However, few reporters had any or had sought any technical training to help them better cover the complexities of the nuclear plant. Similar to coverage before the accident, there was very little interpretive, explanatory, or investigative reporting done during 1981-82. The prime lesson learned by the newspapers was to pay attention to nuclear plant problems and report about them in detail, generally through straight news reporting. (HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED246423

Mass Communications & Society

LOCAL COVERAGE OF THREE MILE ISLAND DURING 1981-82

Sharon M. Friedman
Associate Professor of Journalism and
Director, Science and Environmental Writing Program
Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pa. 18015

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Presented to the Mass Communications & Society Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Annual Convention, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, August 5-8, 1984.

This research was funded by a grant from the Energy Research Center and the Office of Research, Lehigh University.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sharon M. Friedman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS208384

Mass Communications & Society

LOCAL COVERAGE OF THREE MILE ISLAND DURING 1981-82

Sharon M. Friedman, Lehigh University, Bethlehem, PA 18015

ABSTRACT

This paper updates an earlier study done in 1979 for the President's Commission on the Accident at Three Mile Island of coverage of the nuclear plant by the local media before the accident. It examines what lessons were learned by six medium-sized newspapers in Harrisburg, Lancaster and York from the accident and subsequent critiques of media performance.

Findings show that the number of articles on TMI printed by the six newspapers increased more than 10-fold (1,897 articles) in 1981-82, compared to a two-year period before the accident (155 articles). Coverage focused primarily on the clean up of the damaged reactor in 1981 but shifted to concerns over restarting the undamaged reactor in 1982. Events were too diverse to allow any one organization to set the media's agenda during this period, contrasting strongly to the time before the accident when the utility dominated coverage. Source use, which had been poor before the accident, improved considerably, due to the large number of "actors" now involved in the TMI story. Still missing, however, were more neutral "non-actors."

Four newspapers had established part-time TMI beats, with reporters indicating they spent more time covering TMI than they did before the accident. However, few reporters had any or had sought any technical training to help them better cover the complexities of the nuclear plant.

Similar to coverage before the accident, there was very little interpretive, explanatory or investigative reporting done during 1981-82. Coverage was tied to outside events and passive in nature, although most news sources still thought it was better than most national reporting on TMI. Most of the media personnel thought their coverage had improved since the accident, but several felt it had gotten worse because reporters relied too heavily on the wire services or blanket press releases.

The prime lesson learned by these newspapers from the accident was to pay attention to nuclear plant problems and report about them in detail, generally through straight news reporting, which was better than average in five of the six newspapers. However, in going beyond straight news reporting, all of the newspapers fell down on the job because they did not provide much perspective and they let events control their coverage.

This does not bode well for coverage of nuclear power and other risk-laden issues, for if these newspapers--which have covered a major accident and been heavily scrutinized--will not make efforts to explain technological issues to their readers in some depth, few others of their size will either. In this increasingly technological age, it may prove necessary for citizens to seek some alternative ways to get the additional information they need to make informed decisions about nuclear power and other risk-laden issues.

LOCAL COVERAGE OF THREE MILE ISLAND DURING 1981-82

Sharon M. Friedman

Perhaps no event in recent history has been scrutinized in as much detail as the accident at the Three Mile Island (TMI) Nuclear Plant in 1979. At least three commissions investigated this occurrence, including the President's Commission on the Accident at TMI, which not only looked at the technical problems, but examined the media's behavior and performance as well.

One part of the media inquiry by the President's Commission included an analysis of local media coverage of TMI that occurred before the accident, analyzing newspaper, radio and television reporting in Harrisburg, Lancaster, York and Middletown. The purpose of this investigation, which was conducted in the summer of 1979, was to evaluate how much and what kind of information residents of the surrounding region had been given about the nuclear plant up to the time of the accident. Another segment of this study examined how much information the utility, Metropolitan Edison (Met Ed), had provided both to the media and to the local residents directly through its community relations program (1).

This paper seeks to update that earlier study by looking at local newspaper coverage of TMI for 1981 and 1982. It will examine what changes, if any, were made by the local media and try to evaluate what lessons they learned from the accident.

The Local Media

There are six daily newspapers—two of which have Sunday editions—and several weekly newspapers in the TMI region. Although the 1979 media study included one weekly newspaper, the Middletown Press and Journal, this

newspaper was not included in this investigation due to its small circulation and its perceived lack of influence on the community. The other weekly newspapers, primarily "shoppers," also were excluded for this reason as well as the lack of 1979 baseline data for comparison.

Of the six daily newspapers in the region, the Harrisburg Patriot and its sister, the Harrisburg Evening News, are jointly owned and part of the Newhouse newspaper chain (2). The Patriot, the morning newspaper, is published six days a week, and its staff has prime responsibility for the Sunday Patriot-News. The Evening News is published five days a week, although some of its staff members contribute to the Saturday and Sunday editions. Daily circulation of the Patriot as noted in the 1983 edition of Editor and Publisher Yearbook is 46,084 while that of the Evening News is 58,640; Saturday circulation is 91,076, while the Sunday edition reaches 154,760 readers.

Also jointly owned are the Lancaster Intelligencer-Journal, the morning newspaper, (circulation, 41,191) and the afternoon Lancaster New Era (circulation, 57,984). Their Sunday edition, the Lancaster Sunday News, reaches 137,111 readers. The afternoon York Dispatch and the morning York Daily Record are competitors, with daily circulations of 50,210 and 38,695 respectively. They do not publish on Sunday.

There are a number of radio and television stations in the area, with WGAL-TV in Lancaster having the largest audience share. Because radio and television coverage was only cursorily examined in 1979, an in-depth analysis was not attempted here. However, the executive producer of WGAL-TV's news program was interviewed for this study.

Methodology

The 1979 local media study was accomplished through interviews with 23

newspaper reporters and editors and 13 reporters and news directors of the radio and television stations. Clippings of pre-accident coverage of the local newspapers also were studied using the library files of the Harrisburg newspapers and files subpoenaed from Met Ed for the other newspapers. (While the Met Ed files may have been incomplete, time constraints on the 1979 study prevented any further review.)

For this study, five prime TMI reporters (one newspaper could not identify a reporter), six city editors and six editors or executive editors were interviewed in order to get views on coverage throughout the "chain of command." Eleven of these people also had been interviewed for the 1979 study. While the same interviewing instrument was used for the reporters and city editors, a briefer version was used for the editors or executive editors since they did not know the detailed, day-to-day information requested of the others.

Also interviewed were the Washington correspondent for the Harrisburg newspapers, the prime editorial writer on TMI for the Harrisburg newspapers, the Harrisburg bureau chief of the Associated Press (AP) and the WGAL television producer already mentioned. Altogether, 21 media representatives participated in new study.

TMI coverage in the six newspapers was examined using each newspaper's clipping files for 1981-82. These years were chosen in order to have two complete years as far removed from the accident as possible, so the coverage would be routine rather than extraordinary.

Last, to get a different view of the newspapers' performance, 14 people who had served as news sources for the local media during this time were interviewed. These people included representatives of the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Resources, the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency, the Office of the Governor, the Nuclear Regulatory

Commission (NRC), a county board of commissioners, the Harrisburg Chamber of Commerce, GPU Nuclear, the Union of Concerned Scientists, Three Mile Island Alert, People Against Nuclear Energy and Friends and Family of TMI.

Results

In the years since the accident, many changes have been made around TMI. The name of the organization running TMI has been changed from Metropolitan Edison to GPU Nuclear. Evacuation plans have been drawn up for the surrounding townships and counties. Many lessons appear to have been learned.

What have the local media learned about reporting on TMI and what changes have they made? These questions can be answered by looking at six key areas--1) the quantity of their coverage, 2) the issues they covered, 3) the sources they used and the roles played in agenda setting, 4) wire service use, 5) the TMI beat and the technical background of the reporters who covered the beat and 6) the quality of the coverage as determined from several different perspectives.

Quantity of TMI Coverage

The number of articles on TMI printed by each of the six newspapers significantly increased during 1981-82 when compared to that done before the accident (see Table 1). The Harrisburg newspapers, for example, published 554 TMI articles compared to 60 from 1977 to March 1979--nearly a 10-fold increase. Of these 554, 241 appeared in the daily Patriot, 281 appeared in the Evening News, which is only published five days per week and 32 appeared in the Sunday Patriot-News. The Lancaster Intelligencer-Journal, which had run 37 articles from 1976-78, published 336, while its sister newspaper, the Lancaster New Era, published 278 articles and the Lancaster Sunday News ran 26 articles during 1981-82. (No 1979 data were

TABLE 1

Number of Articles on Three Mile Island Published in Local Newspapers Pre-Accident and in 1981-82

Newspapers	Pre-Accident*	1981	1982	1981-82 Total
Harrisburg Patriot	60**	123	118	241
Harrisburg Evening News		162	119	281
Sunday Patriot-News		22	10	32
Lancaster Intelligencer-Journal	37	190	146	336
Lancaster New Era	—	160	118	278
Lancaster Sunday News	—	16	10	26
York Daily Record	34	202	136***	338
York Dispatch	24	216	149	365
TOTAL	155	1,091	806	1,897

*This time period for the Harrisburg newspapers was 1977 to March 1979. For all other newspapers, it was 1976-78.

**This figure represents the combined coverage for all Harrisburg newspapers during this period.

***Only the first 10 months of 1982 were available on microfilm for the study.

available for the latter two newspapers.)

The York Daily Record ran 338 articles for 1981 and the first 10 months of 1982, compared to 34 articles printed in 1976-78. (Microfilm records for the last two months of 1982 were not available for this study.) The York Dispatch, printed 365 articles compared to 24. However, in evaluating this newspaper's coverage, its policy of printing very short articles must be considered; most TMI articles only averaged two or three paragraphs.

In terms of space, number of column inches was not measured because of the vast quantity of articles, but the Harrisburg Evening News appears to have devoted the most space to TMI, followed by the two Lancaster newspapers, the Harrisburg Patriot and the York Daily Record. The York Dispatch gave the least amount of space to the subject, despite its article count, because of its short-article policy.

Coverage of all six newspapers was higher in 1981 than in 1982, dropping from a total of 1,091 stories to 806. Media personnel indicated this drop was due to a perceived lack of public interest in TMI and their concern that readers were tired of reading about it. They also noted that not as many newsworthy events happened in 1982.

Television news coverage at WGAL, which is located in Lancaster but beamed to the entire region, also was high during this period, according to the executive producer of the news show. He reported that station personnel counted 424 TMI stories with visuals that ran during 1981-82. He estimated that between 175 and 200 additional on-camera reports with no visuals were used (3).

In addition to articles, five of the six newspapers ran editorials on TMI during 1981-82: there were 38 daily and 4 Sunday editorials in the Harrisburg newspapers (both daily newspapers ran the same editorials); 17

appeared in the Lancaster Intelligencer-Journal; 11 ran in the Lancaster New Era and 3 were in the Lancaster Sunday News. Fourteen editorials ran in the York Daily Record. None appeared in the York Dispatch.

Judging by the number of news articles and editorials, these six newspapers and one of the local television stations paid considerably more attention to TMI during 1981-82 than they did before the accident. All of the newspapers approached or exceeded a 10-fold increase over their coverage before the accident. Some readers believe they paid too much attention to TMI and did not let people forget the accident and get on with their daily living (4).

The Issues Covered

TMI coverage before the accident included such topics as antinuclear protests, plant evaluations, licensing hearings, safety and plant events and security problems. (Table 2 shows a breakdown by subject for the two Harrisburg newspapers from 1977 to March 1979; subject distribution was similar in the other newspapers.) A number of articles related "good news" about TMI including the dedication of TMI-2, a good rating for TMI-1 from the NRC and the beginning of commercial operation of TMI-2.

Pointedly missing was detailed coverage of problems occurring at the nuclear plant, despite the fact that Met Ed issued weekly press releases detailing the status of each reactor and what problems had been reported to the NRC that week. These releases could have been used by an observant press to watch out for serious problems, but they were ignored, partially because they were written by engineers who used technical jargon and partially because the newspapers were not paying a great deal of attention to the TMI story.

During 1981-82, although the accident was long past, there were many

TABLE 2

Percentage of Articles on Three Mile Island in the Harrisburg Newspapers by Subject from 1977 to March 1979

Subject	1977 % (N=19)	1978 % (N=31)	Jan-Mar 1979 % (N=10)
Anti-nuclear protests	5.3	—	—
Plant Evaluations	21.1	—	—
Licensing Hearings	15.8	48.4	40.0
Safety and Plant Events	36.8	19.4	—
Security Problems	—	12.9	—
Miscellaneous	21.1	19.4	60.0
TOTAL	100.1%	100.1%	100.0%

newsworthy activities concerning TMI including numerous aspects of the TMI-2 cleanup, concern over its funding and plans to restart TMI-1, the undamaged unit that had been shut for refueling when the accident occurred. Additionally, there were lawsuits resulting from the accident, a cheating scandal involving plant operators and the development of evacuation plans and emergency drills. TMI-2 cleanup activities included environmental monitoring issues, exposure of employees to radiation, radiation leaks, ventings of radioactive gas, entries into the containment building, various schemes to decontaminate radioactive water, ways of disposing of radioactive waste and assessing the damage caused by the accident. Restart concerns for Unit 1 included possible embrittlement of the reactor vessel, possible leaks in 31,000 steam generator tubes and numerous hearings and investigations. Beyond that was the whole issue of whether psychological stress caused by TMI should be considered a valid issue in evaluating restart--a question that eventually went to the U.S. Supreme Court. All of these issues were complex on both a technical and contextual basis.

Again using the Harrisburg newspapers as indicators of overall coverage, in 1981, the most coverage was devoted to technical cleanup issues, followed by articles on funding the cleanup and then topics related to restart. In 1982, restart topics dominated the coverage followed by technical cleanup operations. Articles on cleanup funding were third, but fell from 21.5 percent (N=66) in 1981 to 10.5 percent (N=26) in 1982 (see Table 3).

One caution, however, must be made concerning these data because many of the articles written in the Harrisburg newspapers were "roundup" stories, covering several different events or occurrences. In these instances, the articles were coded for the subject appearing in the headline

TABLE 3

Percentage of Articles on Three Mile Island in the Harrisburg Newspapers by Subject, 1981-82

Subject	1981 % (N=307)	1982 % (N=247)
Anniversary Events	5.5	5.7
Accident Hearings, Investigations and Revelations	2.0	2.8
Accident Lawsuits	4.6	5.7
Anti-nuclear Activities	1.0	1.2
Employee Concerns	5.9	6.5
General Design and Construction	—	0.4
Safety Design and Measures	10.8	8.1
Restart Issues and Hearings	19.2	30.8
TMI-2 Cleanup Funding	21.5	10.5
TMI-2 Cleanup Operations	28.0	27.5
Others	1.6	0.8
TOTAL	100.9%	100.0%

NOTE: Articles involving several events or occurances were coded by the subject that appeared in the headline and first paragraph. Those containing more than one subject, such as employees working on cleanup activities, were coded as to the major point of the article. One person coded all the articles.

and in the first paragraph. Also some articles, while involving one subject, clearly concerned another as well. For example, if a worker was contaminated during cleanup events, this could be coded in either of two categories. In this event, judgments were made as to the major point of the article and it was coded accordingly. This was a particular concern with activities related to the anti-nuclear forces, and their low showing in coverage is because most of the articles relating to them dealt primarily with hearings, restart or cleanup concerns and were coded accordingly.

The 1981-82 coverage paid much more attention to problems at the plant and provided many more details than that done before the accident. However, it still lacked depth and perspective, which will be discussed below.

Editorial content unanimously supported a safe and speedy cleanup operation, with all but one newspaper, the Lancaster New Era, feeling that cleanup was not moving ahead at a fast enough pace. The issue of restarting Unit 1 produced several different editorial responses. The Harrisburg newspapers took a very strong stand that restart should not be allowed until the cleanup task is over. The Lancaster Intelligencer-Journal was not sure restart should be allowed at all because it felt GPU Nuclear had not prover it could run a nuclear plant. The York Daily Record concerned itself with the problem of a "safe" restart, while the Lancaster New Era indicated that as long as the NRC agreed, restart was acceptable.

These positions represent some change from their 1979 editorial attitudes. At that time all but the Lancaster Intelligencer-Journal had been moderately in favor of nuclear power and only slightly concerned about safety issues. The Intelligencer-Journal had had a slightly anti-nuclear leaning and had expressed some early safety concerns, but primarily about another nuclear plant in its coverage area rather than TMI.

Source Use, Agenda Setting and Utility Credibility

Very few sources were used for TMI stories before the accident besides Met Ed. In fact, despite the technical jargon found in early TMI press releases, very few reporters bothered to call the utility to ask for explanations of terms or make inquiries about the significance of various events. Only one reporter said he went to outside sources for assistance in understanding what was happening at TMI--and he went to the NRC.

Source use improved considerably in 1981-82, primarily because there were so many more actors in the TMI drama. An improved public information office at GPU Nuclear put out many press releases, although it dropped issuing its weekly report on the status of the plant. The pro- and anti-nuclear groups also were very active, both those in the Harrisburg region and in Washington, D.C.. Another prime newsmaker was the NRC, both at the TMI site and in Washington, as well as its Atomic Safety Licensing Board, which held long hearings on various TMI issues. The NRC office at the TMI site began issuing a weekly summary of activities that several reporters said they read religiously, despite its technical detail. Other sources of news included the courts, both state and national, as lawsuits were filed, and various banks and financial institutions concerned with cleanup costs and the utility's solvency. Numerous government officials including the governor of Pennsylvania and many congressmen and senators suggested or announced support for various funding schemes, as did representatives of the nuclear industry.

Still missing as sources, however, were non-actors in the TMI story who could be more neutral in providing information. Although a few reporters noted they occasionally called a nearby scientist or university professor, none made regular use of scientific sources from universities or scientific societies who could provide less biased and more balanced expla-

nations of technical matters than those directly involved in TMI events. The news personnel also did not know of any media services or lists available to help them reach such experts.

Agenda Setting. Unlike pre-accident coverage which the utility dominated, 1981-82 coverage showed no clear picture as to who set the media agenda. Reporters and city editors were divided as to which organization had had the most influence on their coverage. Five said it was the NRC, four felt it was GPU Nuclear, four said various anti-nuclear forces and four said no group did. Most of the people who had served as press sources felt the prime agenda setter was either GPU Nuclear or the anti-nuclear forces. It appears that events were too diverse for any one organization to have set the agenda during these two years.

Utility Credibility. Met Ed had suffered a severe loss of credibility during the accident. However, reporters were not pleased with Met Ed's information operation even before the accident. They found its TMI press releases hard to understand and difficult to use in judging the significance of an event for the plant and the populace.

A reporter from the York Daily Record said that before the accident when safety questions were asked, Met Ed information staff members tended to smooth things over (5). The city editor of the Harrisburg Evening News accused Met Ed of hiding the seriousness of the problems it encountered and of propagandizing when it could (6). With few exceptions, the news personnel agreed that Met Ed had misled them about the severity of events before the accident.

Reporters and editors had better views of the utility's information operation during 1981-82. Many changes had been made, including the name change from Met Ed to GPU Nuclear. A new enlarged group of people had been

hired to staff the TMI information operation, which was located on the island rather than in Reading, Pa., as it had been before the accident. Drawn from newspapers and television stations--some of them local--these new information staff members had an understanding of media needs and, in some instances, were former colleagues of local reporters and editors.

Sixteen out of 21 reporters and editors gave GPU information staff members--particularly Douglas Bedell and John Fidler--good grades, saying they were well versed in the issues, helpful and very accessible during 1981-82. There were some complaints, however, related to a perceived greater interest in image than substance. Three people still had concerns about credibility.

Most reporters and city editors felt that GPU's press releases were accurate, understandable and did not include much technical jargon. Of 10 people ranking the press releases on a five-point scale from excellent to poor, two found them excellent; three, very good; three, good, and two, poor. However, the majority of the news personnel had reservations that they were only being told the utility's view of events. "They keep you informed about what they want you to know," said one reporter (7).

Eight reporters and editors said that information staff members at GPU Nuclear had not misled or lied to them or the community during 1981-82, although three qualified their answers by saying questions were not always answered fully and the utility tried to present its own perspective. "Depending on the criticality of the situation, they would either be vauge or not convey as much information as they were holding. If reporters didn't ask the question, they didn't feel the need to provide the information," said one reporter (8). Three people cited specific examples where they felt misled by information office personnel, while a fourth accused them of lying concerning one particular incident. In general, the TMI information

operation seems to have established good relations with the local media, but there is still some lack of trust evident.

Wire Service Use

Another source of information for the local newspapers was the wire services, and the importance of the AP wire service cannot be underestimated for newspapers in Lancaster and York. In 1981, 63 percent of the Lancaster Intelligencer-Journal's articles were from AP; in 1982, it was 53 percent. For the Lancaster New Era, AP articles made up 50 percent of its coverage in 1981 and 36 percent in 1982. In York, 61 percent of the York Daily Record's coverage was from AP, while this dropped to 31 percent in 1982. The York Dispatch used United Press International as well as AP for 54 percent of its coverage in 1981 and 52 percent of its coverage in 1982.

In contrast, the Harrisburg Patriot used both wire services for only 32 percent of its coverage in 1981 and 26 percent in 1982. The Harrisburg Evening News, used wire service coverage for 10 percent of its TMI coverage in 1981 and 7 percent in 1982.

The reasons behind the disparity in wire service use are varied, but relate to geographic location, among other things. Most events, such as court hearings or protests, would either be in or near Harrisburg, and would be covered by Harrisburg reporters. Unless there was some special significance or a local person was involved in a Harrisburg-based event, the Lancaster and York editors said they generally chose to pick up the wire service story. Additionally, the Harrisburg newspapers had a Washington-based correspondent who filed a considerable amount of their coverage--in fact, he wrote the most TMI stories of any reporter appearing in the Patriot. The other newspapers depended on the wire services for Washington coverage and this also contributed to their higher use.

Another more subtle reason concerning wire service use arose at one of the Harrisburg newspapers. Here staff members felt that the wire services tended to go for shock headlines or shock interviews and that their stories did not always support their leads. As a consequence, they preferred to cover TMI themselves (9). This charge was strongly denied by the AP bureau chief in Harrisburg (10).

The TMI Beat and its Reporters

In 1979, no local newspaper had a science, environment or energy reporter who regularly covered TMI as part of his or her beat. Instead, the Harrisburg and Lancaster newspapers had general or business reporters who regularly covered TMI when it needed covering along with their other assignments. Usually less than 10 percent of their time was spent on TMI. The York newspapers did not even have that type of specialization; they handed TMI stories to whichever general assignment reporter was available at the time.

Immediately after the accident, five of the six newspapers assigned at least one, but sometimes two or three reporters to TMI coverage. However, as time passed, these assignments changed. By 1981-82, four newspapers had specific reporters assigned to cover TMI as part of their general assignment or business beats--the Harrisburg Evening News, Lancaster Intelligencer-Journal, Lancaster New Era and York Daily Record. Although this appears similar to the 1979 situation, these reporters said they spent more time on TMI than had been done previously.

For example, while the TMI reporter for the Harrisburg Evening News also covered other utility and rate matters and did general assignment as well as business reporting, she said that during 1981-82, she spent between 65 and 70 percent of her time on TMI (11).

At both Lancaster newspapers there was a prime TMI reporter with one or two backup reporters who covered TMI occasionally during 1981-82. No one, however, covered it for the amount of time indicated by the Harrisburg reporter. The current TMI specialist at the Intelligencer-Journal, for example, also is the business editor. He said the time he devoted to TMI coverage tended to vary, but he usually spent two or three days a month on it (12). His city editor estimated that another reporter who covered TMI before the business editor spent between 5 and 10 hours per week on it in 1981, but less than 5 hours per week in 1982 (13).

The prime TMI reporter for the York Daily Record joined the newspaper in August 1981, picking up the beat from a colleague who had covered the accident. This reporter only stayed at this newspaper for 18 months, leaving in February 1983. During his tenure, in addition to TMI, he covered business, the local economy, banking, labor markets and general assignments. He too said TMI coverage was very cyclical. Sometimes, he would spend most of the month on it, and other times he would not work on it for a while. He explained that much of his time at the beginning was spent reading NRC documents and financial information to "get up to speed" (14).

Reporter turnover, a constant bane of smaller newspapers, took its toll on TMI coverage, even on those newspapers with a part-time beat. Only the Harrisburg Evening News reporter had covered it before, during and after the accident. The business editor of the Lancaster Intelligencer-Journal had covered it before and during the accident but someone else had covered it for two years before he took the beat over again. A series of reporters had covered it at the Lancaster New Era and at the York Daily Record, making it hard for each reporter to be aware of past history, charges, problems and the like. With other subjects perhaps this would

not have been too much of a problem, but with a continuing story of the importance and complexity of TMI, switches in reporters made it much harder to provide continuity in coverage. City editors and editors, who were more permanent, tried to provide a general continuity when possible.

Of the two newspapers without TMI beat reporters, the York Dispatch covered it "through the news services," according to Henry Merges, its editor. TMI items from the wire usually were given to the city editor and rewritten and condensed. Anything that did require a reporter, such as covering a nearby meeting on TMI, might go to the utility reporter, but if he was not there it would go to anybody, the city editor explained (15).

At the Harrisburg Patriot, local TMI stories during 1981-82 went to a series of general assignment reporters or else the Patriot depended on the Evening News' TMI specialist or the wire services. As noted earlier, the most regular reporter about TMI for the Patriot was its Washington correspondent, who said he spent about one-third of his time reporting about TMI (16). This newspaper had had a TMI reporter for about 18 months after the accident, but had dropped that position for various reasons, including the editor's preference not to have specialty reporters.

The difference in attitude between the two Harrisburg newspapers is quite interesting. The city editor of the Evening News said: We didn't cover this story properly until the accident....This is a part of people's lives...I'm not about to continue to make that mistake. TMI taught us we didn't pay attention to this significant thing in our community" (17).

The Evening News' prime TMI reporter explained that she felt a beat reporter was necessary because it was good new judgment to have someone knowledgeable about what's happening at the island. It's a major ongoing news event and nothing compares with it locally, she said (18).

However, a Patriot reporter explained that if something came up, they would cover it, but they found it more convenient to pick up the Evening News' stories or take articles off the wire (19). The newspaper's Washington correspondent said he had been told by Patriot editors that readers were getting tired of TMI and that they have played down some of his articles (20). According to Patriot editor Henry Young, "We only have so many people and we don't have enough to have someone hover over the plant." He noted that most of the staff were familiar with TMI and did not need to be educated about it. Young described TMI as a noncritical "daylight story" more easily covered by an afternoon newspaper. It does not have to be covered every day; the Patriot has to cover the ordinary facets of life, he added (21).

No TMI beat reporters were found in the Harrisburg bureau of the AP or in the newsroom of WGAL-TV. Most of the TMI coverage from AP in Harrisburg is written by the bureau chief, who also runs the office and handles state coverage. He estimated that he spent no more than 5 percent of his time on TMI coverage, although, upon reflection, he felt this figure was closer to 1 percent (22). At the television station, TMI had been given some special attention by the current anchorman who had a personal interest in it.

Reporters' Technical Background. In 1979, none of the reporters or editors interviewed possessed any scientific or technical background, nor had they sought any special training in how a nuclear plant operated, although one city editor had served in the "nuclear navy" and did know something about nuclear plant operations. This situation had not improved a great deal in 1981-82. No science or energy specialists had been hired by these newspapers and only one of the media personnel had any science or technical background. Besides the city editor just mentioned, only one had taken any special training relating to nuclear power plants. However, the accident

itself had served as an educator for reporters from the Harrisburg Evening News and the Lancaster Intelligencer-Journal. Both veterans said they understood the technical concerns at the plant and felt comfortable dealing with them.

The TMI reporter for the York Daily Record from mid-1981 through 1982 was the one with some technical background, having taken some engineering courses in college. He also had another asset--he had switched from an engineering to an economics concentration and this latter background greatly aided his reporting on the financial aspects of the cleanup. The reporter for the Lancaster New Era had sought some training, taking a semester-long graduate course on nuclear technology as well as attending a day-long seminar held by the NRC on the mechanics of nuclear power plants. The remaining reporters, including those for AP and WGAL, had less experience and background and often had to depend on others to provide the technical explanations they needed.

The three reporters cited most often by press sources as writing the best articles about TMI locally were the Harrisburg Evening News reporter--more than one-third of the sources called her coverage "outstanding"--the Washington correspondent for the Harrisburg newspapers and the reporter for the Lancaster New Era.

Quality of Coverage

Most of the reporting done before the accident was superficial in nature, straight hard news on various activities concerning TMI. There was very little in-depth reporting, such as investigative articles, series or interpretive or background pieces. Editors said this lack of in-depth coverage was largely because of small staffs or the absence of reporters with enough technical expertise to pursue and investigate stories about the

plant and its machinery.

The type of TMI reporting done by the local newspapers during 1981-82 did not differ greatly from that before the accident in that it too consisted primarily of straight hard news reporting. The quality of that hard news reporting varied with the newspapers and over time, but it appeared to be adequate or better in all but the York Dispatch.

As in 1979, very little interpretive, explanatory or investigative reporting occurred, although occasional "perspective" pieces did appear by the Harrisburg newspapers' Washington correspondent. Almost all of the people who served as press sources, including representatives of both the pro- and anti-nuclear camps, took the newspapers to task for lack of digging, for being event oriented and for not following through on stories. They said the newspapers did not report anything beyond the latest happening.

A number of the reporters and editors agreed that the majority of their articles reacted to events and did not often include in-depth or investigative pieces. Asked how frequently they initiated their own articles, most answered not too often. The reporter for the York Daily Record said his stories on steam generator tube leaks were initiated by him, but most of his coverage was reactive (23). The Lancaster Intelligencer-Journal reporter said he initiated stories about six times a year (24). Most Patriot and Evening News staff members agreed that initiated stories were not done very often. Said a Patriot reporter, "I share some of the day-to-day boredom with TMI. I don't go out of my way to generate story ideas. I've never sensed any concerns from my editors about it. In-depth stories about the cleanup haven't interested me and no one's pushed me on it" (25). The AP bureau chief related he did two or three self-initiated

stories a year, primarily wrapups on where things stood (26).

In contrast, the Lancaster New Era reporter declared: "We've got a good track record. We explained Unit 1 repairs and the treated water. We didn't wait for an incident. We tried to step backward and explain the situation" (27).

Figures 1 and 2 showing the number of TMI articles printed each month for each newspaper during 1981-82 confirm an event-oriented coverage pattern, particularly in 1982. For almost all cases of high coverage, corresponding events can be delineated. For example, in 1981, five of the six newspapers ran the most articles on TMI in March; in 1982, this was true for all six newspapers. March, of course, is the anniversary month of the accident, filled with many events originated by GPU Nuclear and pro- and anti-nuclear groups. A peak in August 1981 can be tied to the start of the plant operators cheating scandal, while the high in October reflects press interest in the processing of radioactive water and an accelerated schedule of entries into the TMI-2 containment building. The peak in May 1982 relates to the local referendums held on whether to restart Unit 1, concerns about leaks in the steam generator tubes and further revelations on the cheating scandal. Summer highs in 1982 concern the first three "quick looks" into the damaged Unit 2 reactor with a miniature camera by GPU Nuclear and reports of the "bed of rubble" found there.

This type of reactive reporting, combined with the lack of interpretive or investigative coverage, does not speak well for the quality of the overall TMI coverage during 1981-82 (not to be confused with the quality of straight news reporting). With all of the many points at issue at TMI--including whether cleanup was proceeding safely and concerns over starting up the undamaged reactor--such coverage could confuse readers and perhaps

Number of Articles Published By Month in
the Harrisburg, Lancaster and York Newspapers

FIGURE 1--1981

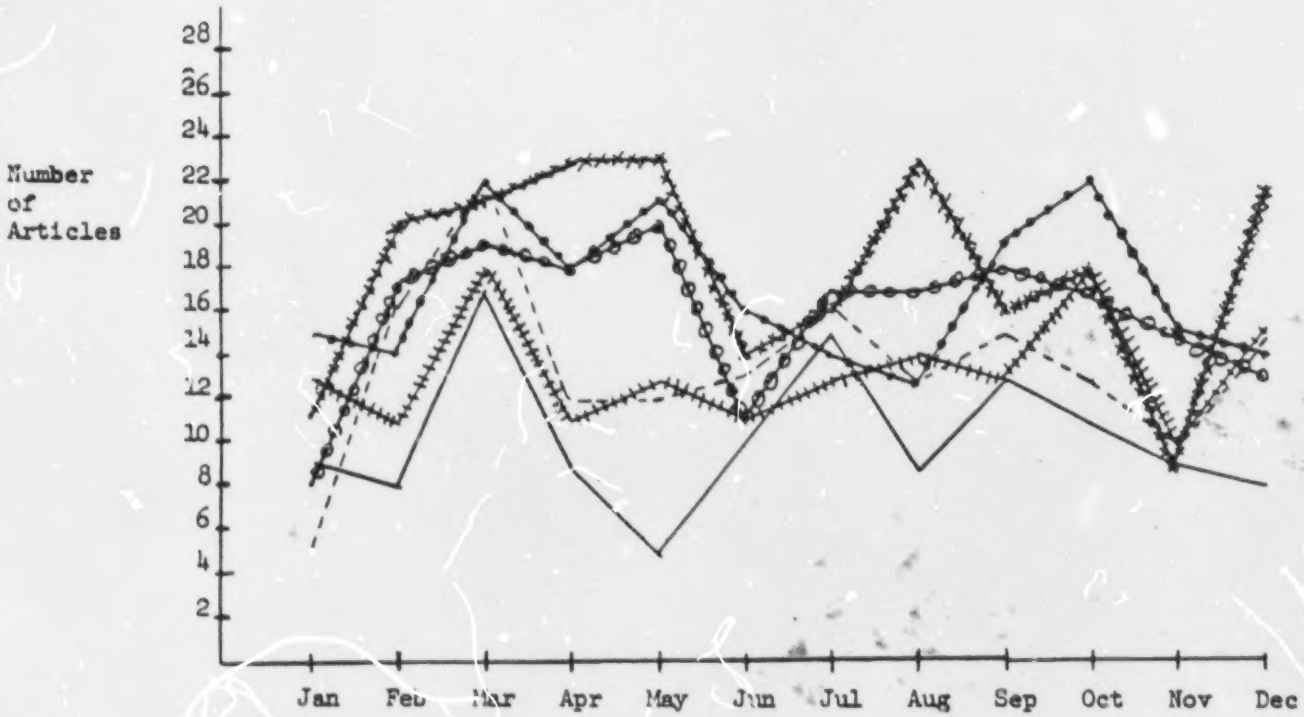
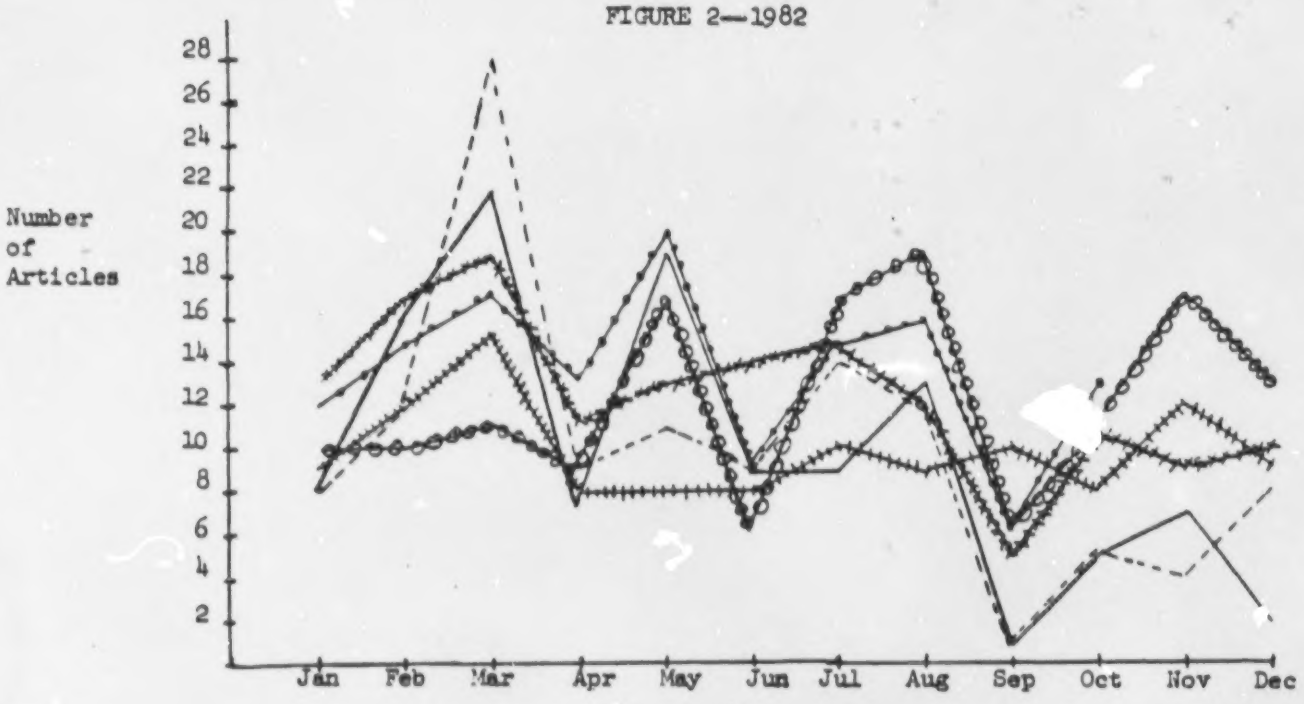


FIGURE 2--1982



LEGEND:
Harrisburg Patriot
Harrisburg Evening News
Lancaster Intelligencer-Journal
Lancaster New Era
York Daily Record
York Dispatch

even mislead them. It is hard enough for readers to understand just one aspect of the TMI story, let alone all of the many issues involved, unless such complex information is put into perspective.

Some of the reasons editors gave for this event orientation and lack of interpretive or investigative reporting were similar to those voiced in 1979, including the size of the reporting staff. An editor at the York Daily Record said he only had eight reporters to assign to this type of story and he had many more topics to cover than just TMI (28).

Several other reasons for the coverage problems were new, however, including lack of direct access to technical personnel who work at TMI, which hampered in-depth reporting. Said the AP Harrisburg bureau chief, "Given the island's physical set-up, I can't stroll down to someone's office and chat and get another viewpoint from the press office's" (29).

Another reason cited by some news personnel was that a source wouldn't take a "big" story to be investigated to the local media, but rather would feed it to the national newspapers to get the most coverage. A staff member at the Union of Concerned Scientists agreed with this observation.

Last, editors, in particular, said they were concerned about whether readers would take the time to read long, involved interpretive stories and consequently did not assign many of them.

Local versus National Coverage. Despite these problems with in-depth coverage and event orientation, most people who served as press sources agreed that the local newspapers did a far better overall job on TMI than did most of the national media including such newspapers as The New York Times, the Washington Post and the Philadelphia Inquirer. The sources said this was because the local reporters lived with the TMI story every day and had more general knowledge and background about the issues involved. "The national media blow in and out and make no effort to keep track of what's

happening," said Phil Fine, manager of public information for TMI (30).

Even local news personnel joined their sources in accusing the national media of "hyping" stories, saying the farther away the media are situated from TMI, the more sensational the stories.

Press sources felt too that local reporters were more sensitive to the needs and concerns of the people in the area, particularly concerns over psychological stress caused by fear of another TMI accident. Saul Kohler, executive editor of the Harrisburg newspapers, said they consider the stress issue all of the time. "We check everything so closely and we deal with unusual events at TMI as calmly as we can." However, he noted, this concern does not stop them from informing readers about events at the plant (31). In fact, the Harrisburg newspapers have been criticized for printing TMI's radioactive gas venting schedules in their weather columns (32).

Do the Media Think Their Coverage Has Improved? Ten of the newspersons interviewed felt that local TMI coverage had gotten better since the accident. To support this contention they said that coverage was more even-handed, more consistent, technically better, more sophisticated and quoted more diverse sources.

On the other hand, one reporter and three editors felt it had gotten worse. The reporter said it had gotten worse because the people who covered the accident were gone and newer reporters relied too much on the wire services or blanket releases without delving into or checking things out. "I don't think the same professionalism is there. People don't spend the same time on it," the reporter explained (33).

One editor who had covered TMI felt his newspaper had done better immediately after the accident, but had regressed badly since then. "We're back to doing what we did before the accident," he said (34). Two other

editors, both from the same newspaper, felt that TMI itself was losing its importance as an issue and that the loss of a reporter who had specialized in TMI had hurt their newspaper. "We've done our best but our coverage has gone downhill," one editor said (35).

Of the people who served as press sources, four thought local newspaper coverage had gotten better, three thought it had stayed the same and two thought it had gotten worse. Those who felt it was better credited increased coverage plus more knowledgeable reporters. However, even they had reservations. Said one: "Quality has improved, but not markedly. They are still heavily reliant on sources. But they are no longer befuddled by some technical words" (36). Those who thought it had gotten worse generally criticized the newspapers for emphasizing too many negative aspects of the TMI story.

Conclusions

Some of the underlying reasons behind the media's performance before the TMI accident relate to complacency, size and lack of technical understanding and background. Media complacency was exemplified by superficial reporting of TMI events and the use of very few, if any, outside sources. Additionally, in much of their coverage, the media followed the utility's lead on what should be reported about the plant.

Size of the media organizations also was a factor. Staffs were small and none had the personnel, time and financial resources to pursue topics for weeks or even days on end. This discouraged both in-depth reporting and the designation of a TMI beat reporter.

The last factor, lack of technical understanding and background, concerns reporters not speaking or understanding the "nuclear language." Many did not know how a nuclear reactor worked, let alone how a stuck

valve--one of the causes of the accident--would affect various operations. They had trouble understanding terminology such as automatic actuation, deenergized power distribution buses and the like. Yet, no one made any effort to seek training or to better his or her technical background; nor did the reporters seek out experts to help them.

Were these three factors still influencing local TMI coverage during 1981-82? For the most part, the answer is yes, although they did not appear to have as heavy an influence as they had before the accident. This is indicated by the major change in coverage that did take place despite these problems--area residents were receiving considerably more information about the nuclear plant than they had been before the accident from the six newspapers. (Credit for the increased information also must be given to the information staffs of GPU Nuclear and the NRC.)

Yet, despite this increased coverage, can the newspaper staffs still be considered complacent? Unfortunately, the answer is yes. They cover TMI in greater quantity, but they do not often do it in depth, nor do they investigate issues on their own. Their coverage is still somewhat superficial, but better than it was before the accident.

Is newspaper staff size still a problem? Indeed it is. Possibly it is the most overriding problem. With small staffs, the local newspapers cannot devote time or people to provide perspective for readers. Also their size makes them hew more closely to journalistic traditions of hard news and general assignment reporting. It inhibits them from seeking specialty energy or science writers and it also prevents them from sending their reporters for some technical training.

Do the staffs understand the nuclear language? Certainly, their understanding is better than before the accident. Everyone questioned felt his or her knowledge about nuclear plant operations had improved. But how

deep is this technical understanding? Not very, replied most reporters and editors. However, they do not appear too concerned about this lack of depth because they said TMI and NRC sources are better now in explaining information so that members of the press do not need to have as much background as before. But some people question whether such an attitude makes the local media too dependent on their sources and inhibits investigation. Also, some press sources, including TMI and NRC personnel, said they still have problems with the lack of technical knowledge among local reporters and editors.

What lessons have been learned since the accident by the local newspaper staffs? Primarily they have learned to pay attention to nuclear power plant problems and report about them in detail. Compared to other newspapers of their size, those in Harrisburg, Lancaster and York are doing a better job in covering TMI and nuclear power issues in general. But one would expect them to be better after their baptism of fire during the accident. How much better is a more relevant question. In quantity, their reporting is far above average; in quality of straight news reporting, five of the six generally are above average. The Harrisburg Evening News and the Lancaster New Era are ranked highest by press sources, followed by the York Daily Record, Lancaster Intelligencer-Journal and the Harrisburg Patriot. Trailing badly behind is the York Dispatch. Of these newspapers, the Evening News, Daily Record and the two Lancaster newspapers appear to have improved their coverage since the accident, while the Patriot's coverage has slipped in quality and the Dispatch has remained the same.

However, in going beyond straight news reporting, all of the newspapers fall down on the job. For whatever reasons, they do not provide much perspective and they let events control their coverage. As was noted

in 1979 study, they are "not making that extra effort that sets apart a truly good media organization from an average one" (37). This does not bode well for the coverage of nuclear power, for if newspapers sitting in the shadows of the cooling towers of TMI do not make that extra effort, why should those elsewhere do so?

And, unfortunately, studies have shown that other newspapers in the United States and Europe are not making that extra effort either. A nationwide study by Maxwell of daily newspapers located near nuclear plants also found a lack of in-depth coverage (38). In Austria, a 1978 study showed that journalists very seldom did any independent reseach into the nuclear issue and readers were not properly informed. Three later Austrian studies found similar results (39) as did a communications researcher concerned with coverage of nuclear plants in Switzerland (40).

What does this mean for communication researchers, decision makers and others concerned about nuclear power? First, they must remember that in the United States most nuclear plants are not located near major metropolitan areas where they will be covered on a continuing basis by large daily newspapers with specialized reporters. Most will be covered by newspapers of the same size as those in the TMI region and will not be covered with anywhere near the same level of interest or concern as TMI. This means that many citizens will not receive much information from the media about their local nuclear plants, no matter what risks are involved for them.

Second, even if there is sufficient straight news coverage, as there generally has been in the newspapers surrounding TMI, most smaller newspapers cannot be depended upon to help explain or provide perspective in any depth on complex technological issues such as nuclear power to their readers. True, they can--if they are conscientious--alert readers to problems, but the many constraints imposed by their size, economic condi-

tion and journalistic tradition prevent them from providing the in-depth information that people need in order to understand these complicated issues. Based on the performance of the newspapers around TMI, it would appear that most smaller newspapers cannot provide enough information about a controversial technical issue so that readers can make informed decisions about the risks involved.

However, these remarks should not be considered an indictment of these newspapers or their performance. Perhaps, people expect too much from media organizations--what people think newspapers should do and what they can do may be quite different. Depending on smaller newspapers to perform an explanatory and educational role for controversial issues may be unrealistic. Media personnel frequently say their job is to inform, not educate. Whether communications researchers or decision makers like this attitude or not, it is something they should be aware of and be prepared to deal with. They must realize that the media--particularly smaller media organizations--are not bringing people the complete story about the complexities of nuclear power and other risk-laden issues. In this increasingly technological age, it may prove necessary to seek alternative ways for citizens to get the additional information they need.

###

REFERENCES

1. Sharon M. Friedman, "Blueprint for Breakdown: Three Mile Island and the Media Before the Accident," Journal of Communication, Vol. 31, No. 2, Spring 1981, pp. 116-128. Based on Sharon M. Friedman, "Met Ed Public Relations: What the Public Knew About TMI Before the Accident," Report of The Public's Right to Information Task Force. Staff Report of The President's Commission on the Accident at Three Mile Island, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1979, pp. 29-46, plus a 150-page unpublished report of the same title, filed in the U.S. National Archives.

2. Early in 1984, the Harrisburg Patriot and the Harrisburg Evening News merged. They will be treated here, however, as they appeared in 1981-82, as separate entities.

3. Les Miller, executive producer, WGAL-TV. Personal interview, May 5, 1983.

4. Joseph Hoffman, president, Friends and Family of TMI. Personal interview, April 5, 1983.

5. Wiley Brooks, executive editor, Kathryn Duncan, city editor, and James Hill, reporter, York Daily Record. Joint personal interview, July 19, 1979.

6. Dale Davenport, city editor, Harrisburg Evening News. Personal interview, July 17, 1979.

7. Robert Kozak, city editor, and Mark Eyerly, reporter, Lancaster New Era. Joint personal interview, May 4, 1983.

8. Robert Ryan, former reporter, York Daily Record. Telephone interview, June 30, 1983.

9. Confidential information given in interviews, spring 1983.

10. Rich Kirkpatrick, correspondent, Associated Press, Harrisburg Bureau. Personal interview, July 21, 1983.

11. Mary Bradley, reporter, Harrisburg Evening News. Personal interview, May 24, 1983.

12. Charles Ray Shaw, business editor, Lancaster Intelligencer-Journal. Personal interview, May 5, 1983.

13. Robert Cody, city editor, Lancaster Intelligencer-Journal. Personal interview, May 5, 1983.

14. Robert Ryan, op. cit.

15. Terry Holland, city editor, York Dispatch. Personal interview, April 27, 1983.

16. Mick Rood, Washington correspondent, Harrisburg Patriot-News. Personal interview, June 13, 1983.

17. Dale Davenport, city editor, Harrisburg Evening News. Personal interview, May 24, 1983.

18. Mary Bradley, op. cit.

19. Randy Myers, reporter, Harrisburg Patriot. Personal interview, May 11, 1983.

20. Mick Rood, op. cit.

21. Henry Young, editor, Harrisburg Patriot. Personal interview, June 28, 1983.

22. Rich Kirkpatrick, op. cit.

23. Robert Ryan, op. cit.

24. Charles Ray Shaw, op. cit.

25. Randy Myers, op. cit.

26. Rich Kirkpatrick, op. cit.

27. Robert Kozak and Mark Eyerly, op. cit.

28. Sam Fosdick, executive editor, York Daily Record. Personal interview, April 20, 1983.

29. Rich Kirkpatrick, op. cit.

30. Phil Fine, manager of public information, General Public Utilities Nuclear. Personal interview, April 5, 1983.

31. Saul Kohler, executive editor, Harrisburg Patriot-News. Personal interview, July 21, 1983.

32. Lake Barrett, deputy director, TMI Program Office, Nuclear Regulatory Commission. Personal interview, July 22, 1983.

33. Confidential information, op. cit.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. Steve Sholly, staff member, Union of Concerned Scientists. Personal interview, June 13, 1983.

37. Sharon M. Friedman, op. cit.

38. Bruce Maxwell, "Newspapers get high marks on nuclear reporting," Editor and Publisher, December 31, 1983, pp. 14 and 29. Also "Newspaper Coverage of Nuclear Power: An Attitude Survey," unpublished paper, 44 pp.

39. Erich Geretschlaeger, Informationswirkung der Massenmedien im Hinblick auf die Meinungsbildung zur Volksabstimmung Zwentendorf, Institut fur Publizistik U. Kommunikationswissenschaft, University of Salzburg, 1978. Also personal communication, March 1984.

40. Michael Schanne, assistant professor of communications research, University of Zurich. Personal communication, February 1984.